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ABSTRACT

This document provides a background for understanding the conflicts surrounding educational reform and the reactions of the religious right, and it outlines critical implications for policymakers, educators, business leaders, and other interested citizens in North Carolina. Both educational reformers and the religious right agree on the need to improve the schools, but their differences are rooted in widely differing paradigms. The religious right believes that truth is absolute, and that it is the purpose of education to teach these absolutes, while educational reformers see the purpose of contemporary education as teaching students to think for themselves and to develop informed judgment, self-reliance, responsibility, and tolerance. A look at the politics of dissent makes it clear that the religious right has become more sophisticated and effective in recent years. In the 1990s, the focus of religious right opposition to school reform has shifted to local political activity frequently directed by national organizations with well-orchestrated plans. One widespread reform, outcome-based education (OBE), has become the rallying point for the religious right's campaign against reform. In theory, OBE defines desired outcomes of education and measures progress on actual achievement, but in practice it represents a major shift in focus in that attention and incentives are centered around student achievement instead of inputs such as class hours and curriculum requirements. To the religious right, however, OBE is a program that hampers bright students, substitutes psychotherapy for the "three "R's," and usurps parental authority by including values among the goals of public education. In North Carolina, Gaston County's OBE-based Odyssey program has been the center of controversy about school education, although the experiences of North Carolina's Johnston County show that acceptance can be gained if the program is tailored to local wishes. Educational improvement in North Carolina depends on the search for common ground among opposing viewpoints. Implications are outlined for policymakers and legislators, school board members and superintendents, and business leaders and Chamber of Commerce members. (SLD)

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In Search Of

COMMON GROUND

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The conflict between supporters and opponents of change in the nations public schools is not new. It is a common refrain running through a decades-old conversation about how children are to learn. Whether the issue is academic freedom, integration, school prayer, secular humanism or today's push for outcome-based education, the conflict springs from deep and legitimate differences of opinion.

What has changed recently, however, is the tenor of the debate. Issues that were once the purview of local citizens are increasingly part of a national political struggle for power. In many instances, school reform has become a battleground for purposes that go well beyond the boundaries of school yards – as a rallying point to get people elected to local office.

The charge has been led by a loose coalition of allied groups – such as the Christian Coalition, Citizens for Excellence in Education, Focus on the Family, Concerned Women for America and the Eagle Forum – which share an increasingly coherent agenda on issues ranging from abortion and homosexuality to public school reform and income tax policies. Under the spotlight of media attention, this coalition has been termed the "religious right."

It is with some hesitancy that the Public School Forum of North Carolina uses the religious right label in this paper. The Forum is well aware that opposition to school reform cannot be neatly categorized into one package; there are simply too many strands of thought and activity. Calling this coalition "religious" is also problematic, if it implies that its opponents are something else. Yet our analysis indicates that opposition to school reform cannot be thoroughly understood without a careful look at the national influence of these groups, already categorized by the mass media as the religious right.

While school systems from Pennsylvania to Florida, New York to California have felt the impact of the religious right for the last few years, the movement is now appearing in North Carolinas own backyard.

- In Gaston County, well-organized and vocal opposition to a major reform effort, led by a local minister, helped defeat a promising outcome-based education reform plan. Although the local School Board did not initially retract support, the New American Development Corporation withdrew its $20 million funding for the Odyssey project in the midst of divisive community debate, citing the school district's failure to meet certain standards.
- In Alamance County, where Burlington is located, a small group of people created a great deal of controversy by calling for the resignation of the school board chairman, based on the school system's participation in the state's outcome-based education pilot program.

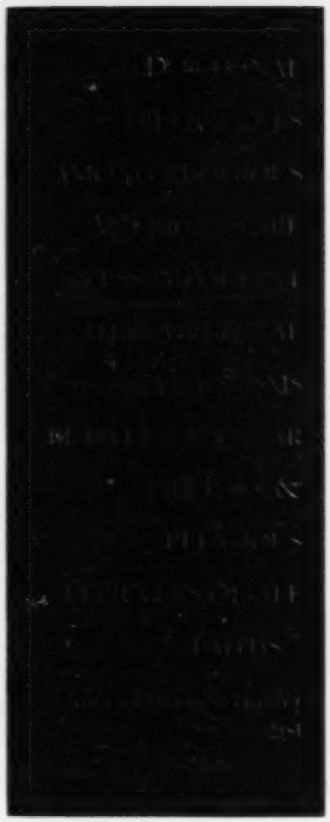
Like others who seek an enlightened discussion of the issues, the Public School Forum finds itself caught in the middle of the debate. While the organization has been associated with school reform efforts in North Carolina for the last decade and likes to think of itself as a force for change, it is not afraid to act as a critic of thoughtless reform. From our perspective, there are persuasive reasons for school reform – and equally valid criticisms of the way some reforms have been initiated and managed. In the last several years, however, the level of dialogue seems to have disintegrated. The argument between supporters and opponents of change is increasingly framed as a struggle between the forces of good and evil, defined by which side one is standing on. Tragically, the process winds up splitting communities, rather than bringing them closer together.

This paper is designed to help North Carolinians – and those facing similar struggles in other states – take a first step toward bridging the gap. In the following pages, the Public School Forum of North Carolina provides a background for understanding the conflict and outlines critical implications for policymakers, educators, business leaders and other interested citizens. *In Search of Common Ground* examines:

- The different paradigms that characterize school reformers and the religious right.
- The political strategies being employed by the religious right.
- The debate over outcome-based education.
- A starting point for overcoming the current climate of polarization and misunderstanding.

The Forum's premise is that if the State is ever to improve its public schools, it must find common ground to build on. It won't be easy. While seeking common ground is in the best interest of the schools, it may not be the goal of all those involved in the debate. For those using differences of opinion for political gain, diffusing the issues may be the least desirable strategy; compromise and middle ground may in fact be the enemy. As Dan Blue, Speaker of the North Carolina House of Representatives, put it, "The issues that polarize us have been misrepresented. They are designed to frighten and divide – and they've done a good job of it."

THE PARADIGMS THAT DIVIDE US



Both the educational reformers and the religious right agree on the pressing need to improve the schools; beyond that, it is often hard to find common ground. Why? The two groups often move in different worlds, literally as well as philosophically, and generally don't see each other until they collide. The roots of this conflict are deep, based on differences of opinion so basic to the individual they are generally taken for granted. As a result, they are often hidden, even to the people most intimately involved. If these distinct world views, or paradigms, are not clearly defined, there is little chance for finding common ground. To overcome the information barrier, the first step is to define both the culture of educational reform and the culture of the religious right. An analysis, however cursory, indicates just how far there is to go before common ground is found.

THE PERSPECTIVE OF SCHOOL REFORMERS

While school reformers are aware of the religious right's "agenda" – particularly in terms of the obstacles it presents – few are conscious of their own differing world view and how it plays out in the classroom. Yet the truth is that the school reform movement has its own culture based on certain assumptions and principles, many of which are in direct contradiction to the world view of the religious right.

"Although education has no written credo, it does have a strong culture that is transmitted in the courses one takes for certification and in the professional journals one reads. This culture of education implicitly passes on certain assumptions and operating principles that, as a group, constitute the paradigm of education," explains educator Robert J. Marzano. Many educators contend that schools inevitably transmit these values through curricula choices and subject matter discussions, as well as in countless teacher-student interactions.

The culture of school reform is generally assumed, rather than spelled out. However, as articulated by a growing number of business organizations, school reformers and the nation's governors, there are several assumptions on which these ideas are built.

SCHOOL REFORM ASSUMPTION 1: The United States is part of a global village.

TRANSLATION: Just as the nation once changed from a predominantly agricultural society to an industrial one, it is now making the momentous shift to the Information Age. Rapid advances in information technology have transformed boundaries and caused the world to shrink. As the communications explosion continues, traditional divisions will become meaningless. The United States is increasingly part of a world community, where the conditions of one country or culture influence all the others. We can no longer survive in isolation. And, the more we know and understand other cultures, the more competitive we will be.

SCHOOL REFORM ASSUMPTION 2: Dramatic changes in the economy place new requirements on workers.

TRANSLATION: The shrinking of the globe has changed the nature of competition forever. We will no longer be able to succeed as a country by making things – we need to create whole new industries. At the same time, American businesses must respond to the demands of a world marketplace by providing high quality goods and services at competitive costs.

As the nation re-engineers its corporations to compete in the global marketplace, we will need to train workers to perform higher value functions. Nearly every job of the future will demand that workers be able to access information, think creatively, solve problems and work in groups. If our citizens are to continue the standard of living to which we have become accustomed, we must prepare them to meet the new challenges of the workplace.

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SCHOOL REFORM ASSUMPTION 3: Being competitive in this environment requires new strategies in the schools.

TRANSLATION: Comparisons of one school system to another, within the State or even the nation, are no longer meaningful. The real question is, how do we stack up against Japan or Germany? America's schools are no longer positioned to fare well in this competition. The "good old days" are gone: traditional ways of doing things will not prepare our students to meet the new criteria for success. Incremental change – more tinkering around the edges – is not the answer. We need a radical restructuring of the entire educational system, from school governance and management to curriculum development and performance standards.

SCHOOL REFORM ASSUMPTION 4: Significant demographic changes are challenging the schools to take on new roles.

TRANSLATION: The nation's schools are dealing with so much more now than they were when today's parents were in school. Many students – "latchkey" children, children from broken homes, children who do not speak English, children who have not been prepared for school, children with behavior problems – demand a type and quality of attention that goes far beyond academic coursework.

At the same time, schools are increasingly required to shoulder responsibilities that are not being picked up by families and communities. The problems of society – violence, drugs, teenage pregnancy – are all coming into our schools. Yet parents and families are less involved in public education than ever before. Whether the lack of involvement is caused by the disruption of neighborhood schools, the growing need for two incomes, or just plain indifference, the schools can't count on the family to address social problems any more.

SCHOOL REFORM ASSUMPTION 5: The schools have a responsibility to teach universal values and codes of behavior.

TRANSLATION: The primary responsibility for teaching moral values and ethical behavior belongs in the home and the religious institution of choice. When parents and community do not fulfill this role, as is increasingly apparent in the behavior of many school children, the public schools must take on some of these functions – for the sake of our classrooms and our society. Certain values are universal and can be identified and taught without interfering with particular religious or moral positions. In fact, the teaching of values and expectations of behavior are modeled and observed throughout the school day, in informal interactions as well as in more structured situations.

SCHOOL REFORM ASSUMPTION 6: Education is more important than ever.

TRANSLATION: Soon, nearly all students will require the equivalent of a community college degree. This means that schools are no longer training students to enter the work force, but preparing them for further education. As public institutions, our schools need to create a level playing field to give all children educational opportunities. In the 21st century everyone will be required to "think for a living" – there will no longer be a guaranteed job market for the child who does not succeed at school. In other words, the mandates of the new economy are forcing schools to succeed with children we've never succeeded with before. And, while there is a high cost to providing the extra resources and assistance "at-risk" students need, we cannot afford failure.

THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT

Who are we talking about when we refer to the religious right? For the purposes of this discussion, the religious right describes a loose-knit coalition of groups with a coherent agenda expressed through a number of strong national organizations. While each organization tends to focus on a particular issue, they all support an expanding cluster of

"pro-family" causes, including opposition to abortion, gay rights, feminism, many public school reforms and income-tax and welfare policies seen as penalizing families. Although there is no religious right manifesto on school reform, a remarkable coherence emerges from the literature.

RELIGIOUS RIGHT ASSUMPTION 1: The United States is a Christian nation.

TRANSLATION: The founding fathers did not intend the separation of Church and state as it has been interpreted by the courts. America's founders were godly men who had in mind establishing a nation that was Christian in nature. "The phrase, 'separation of church and state' has been so misused. They took the Bible out back in '63 and everything's gone downhill since then," says Elizabeth Ridenour of Greensboro, founder of the National Council on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools.

The American way of government is the best in the world. Without the civilizing influence of the Judeo-Christian tradition, however, even the best government structures can go awry. The U.S. Constitution, for example, "is a marvelous document for self-government by Christian people," according to Pat Robertson, founder and president of the Christian Coalition. "But the minute you turn the document into the hands of non-Christian people and atheist people, they can use it to destroy the very foundations of our society. And that's what's happening."

RELIGIOUS RIGHT ASSUMPTION 2: There is a concerted effort to lead people astray.

TRANSLATION: There is a web of conspiracies led or powerfully affected by sinister forces that have seized power in the nation's universities, the schools, the media and the churches. These forces, in the form of secular humanists or New Age practitioners, are responsible for seducing Americans away from their Christian heritage and its moral framework. Our nation's institutions are, knowingly or not, caught in the grip of this conspiracy. "The fundamentalists are angry and ready to fight back. They believe that science and possibly even the cities can be retrieved from the infidels who now control them," writes theologian Harvey Cox in *Religion and the Secular City*.

RELIGIOUS RIGHT ASSUMPTION 3: New Age, the latest form of secular humanism, is an insidious and expanding force.

TRANSLATION: New Age is a religion directly related to the Antichrist. Its mark can be seen everywhere – from the American Civil Liberties Union to NBC Television, the Jewish Kabbala to Transcendental Meditation, the environmental movement to positive thinking. While New Age is dangerous in any arena, it is most disturbing in its infiltration of our public schools. Among the New Age practices threatening the schools are programs such as global education, multiculturalism, self-esteem building and stress management. As Pat Robertson sees it, "... many of these same occult practices ... have been used in public schools to 'retrain' our sons and daughters and to indoctrinate children into the New Age."

RELIGIOUS RIGHT ASSUMPTION 4: The nation's schools are in danger.

TRANSLATION: Children are the "inheritors of original sin" and are thus susceptible to indecent temptations. More than 90 percent of all Christian children attend public schools, exposing them to the evils of today's morally declining schools is risky and possibly calamitous. Nothing is more important than getting children off to a strong moral start. While this is a difficult task under normal conditions, it is even more challenging at a time of disintegrating values, order and social institutions.

RELIGIOUS RIGHT ASSUMPTION 5: Christian parents have one alternative – to fight.

TRANSLATION: Christians have a responsibility to serve as the moral standard-setters for

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education in the fight of the god-fearing against the godless. "Get ready for battle. This is spiritual battle," exhorts Robert Simonds, founder and director of Citizens for Excellence in Education. "Parents, the battle is ours to win or lose," adds Dr. Anthony Evans, president of the Urban Alternative in Dallas. "Sometimes the fight to redeem our culture seems impossible."

We cannot afford to give up, however; our children's souls and futures are at stake. If we have to, we will take over school districts one board at a time to return schools to biblically based beliefs. In the meantime, Simonds adds, "Christian parents need to teach their children to arm themselves against the presence of demons on school campuses."

TWO VIEWS OF EDUCATION

Naturally, when these paradigms are applied to the schools, they result in two very different sets of assumptions, perspectives and goals.

NEED FOR CHANGE

SCHOOL REFORM says that the only certainty is change. To keep pace and prepare students for the future, there must be fundamental changes in the way public schools are structured. They believe that the social problems and demands facing Americans today require that young people develop a broad range of critical thinking and work skills, which in turn demand new ways of teaching students and measuring performance.

RELIGIOUS RIGHT sees change as the problem with the schools, not the solution. In the belief that the schools used to work – and a tendency to romanticize of the past – they propose a return to the "basics." Reforms, on the other hand, are considered unproven experiments in which children are the "guinea pigs." A commonly heard statement, "Don't experiment with our children," sums up this perspective.

PURPOSE OF EDUCATION

SCHOOL REFORM sees the purpose of contemporary education as teaching students to think for themselves and develop informed judgment, self-reliance, imagination, responsibility and tolerance. These new goals – teaching young people to think critically, to understand and respect the views of those different from them and to engage a broad spectrum of ideas – may require the teacher to serve as more of a coach or guide than a lecturer or authority.

RELIGIOUS RIGHT believes the truth is absolute. They believe that the purpose of education is to teach these absolutes. Parents and teachers should serve as authorities and models for young people – not peers.

RESPONSIBILITY FOR TEACHING VALUES

SCHOOL REFORM believes that societal changes, most starkly reflected in the dramatic increase in violence in the schools, indicate that values are often not being taught in the home and should be taught in the schools. Teaching values is considered necessary to address civilization's need for ethical behavior and social responsibility.

RELIGIOUS RIGHT believes the notion of explicitly teaching values in schools is frightening. They worry about infringement on personal values. From their perspective, parents have given permission for the schools to teach academic subjects only – family and church are responsible for all other aspects of children's lives. Moreover, values identified by educators as "universal" may not be consistent with Christian values; for example, opponents of outcome-based education have taken issue with the goal of "tolerance."

GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

SCHOOL REFORM promotes curricula increasingly based on ideas of globalism – seeing the United States as part of larger planet – and multiculturalism, which translates into respecting

other approaches, perspectives and differences. If we are to progress culturally and economically, we must embrace diversity.

RELIGIOUS RIGHT, on the other hand, believes that the United States (and European influence on our country's development) is central. Global education is seen as potentially dangerous: Americans may forget that their premier allegiance should be to God, family and the nation. Multiculturalism is viewed as promoting respect for all choices – including atheism, socialism, New Age, and homosexuality – rather than teaching the significance of Judeo-Christian tradition as the basis for moral, social and cultural standards.

FOCUS OF RESOURCES

SCHOOL REFORM believes that all children can learn, and that schools are responsible for creating a level playing field. Those who have been disadvantaged by birth deserve compensation to bring them up to the level of others who are more privileged.

RELIGIOUS RIGHT believes that resources are being diverted from children whose families have prepared them to learn and unfairly given to children whose families have failed to perform this duty. From their perspective, it is obvious that not all children can learn, and that the schools should recognize the natural limitations of the individual.

THE FUNDAMENTALIST FACTOR

For most progressive thinkers, fundamentalism itself – of whatever denomination or cause – is difficult to comprehend. Those who have attempted to come to terms with it have recognized that fundamentalism serves an understandable purpose: it is a way to maintain individual and communal identity in a time of great social upheaval, a genuine expression of the human need to instill life with meaning, to join with others and to draw security from that community. While the desire to have a handle on the truth may be a natural and universal tendency, the rigidity of fundamentalist views is a stumbling block for even the most understanding outside observers. Those who see the world in absolutes tend to believe that their world view should be the dominant one in American culture, and are intent on stopping the spread of other world views. This "fixation of belief," as philosopher Charles Sanders Pierce called it, goes to "the heart of what fundamentalism is all about. The fundamentalist temperament tends to search for certainty rather than for error. The fundamentalist's tendency is to nail his beliefs in place." The result is the "demonization of doubt," a phrase coined by author Jeremy Rifkin.

Being on the other side of the fence from fundamentalists can thus be painful, particularly for progressive thinkers with deeply held religious convictions. Republican Senator Mark Hatfield of Oregon, an evangelical Christian himself, says, "It's their judgmentalism that worries me. They think if you disagree, you're not following the Gospel." As educator George R. Kaplan explains, "At times, they appear less interested in acquiring equitable representation in the system than in taking it over. And they show little disposition to compromise. If you aren't with them, you might as well be the Antichrist, especially where education is concerned."

But the public arena can be just as uncomfortable for fundamentalists. Dr. Stephen Carter, Yale law school professor and author of *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religion*, offers perhaps the most sympathetic basis for understanding:

> Imagine that you are the parent of a child in a public school and you discover that the school, instead of offering the child a fair and balanced picture of the world – including your lifestyle choice – is teaching things that seem to the child to prove your lifestyle is inferior and perhaps an irrational one. If the school's teachings are offensive to you because you are gay or black or disabled the chances are that the school will at least give you a hearing, and if it does not, many liberals will flock to your side and you will find a sympathetic ear in the media. But if you do not like the way the school talks about religion, or if you believe that the school is inciting your child to abandon

their religion, you will probably find that the media will mock you, the liberal establishment will announce that you are engaged in censorship, and the courts will toss you out on your ear.

Understanding the very real differences of perspective and opinion that characterize the forces for and against change in our schools is essential to opening channels of communication and making reasonable dialogue possible. But it is not enough. If the country is to succeed in improving its schools, more people need to understand the strategies which are increasingly used to block school reforms.

A LOOK AT CONCEPTUAL DIFFERENCES

CONCEPT	SCHOOL REFORMERS	RELIGIOUS RIGHT
WHOLE LANGUAGE	An approach to reading based on meaning and understanding, using literature as a basis	An unproven strategy for learning to read without phonics and traditional grammatical usage and form
CRITICAL THINKING	Developing the capacity to solve problems, analyze data and use information	Learning to question family values
SELF-ESTEEM	Enhancing students' skill at assuming personal responsibility and control for their own learning	Focusing on how children feel, not what they learn
COOPERATIVE LEARNING	Students working in pairs or small groups to study and solve problems, with teachers serving as resources	Children teaching other children, with no authoritative role for the teacher
DECISION-MAKING SKILLS	Encouraging children to weigh options and make decisions for themselves	Learning that different choices are acceptable, rather than being taught right and wrong
GLOBAL EDUCATION	Diverse effort with a variety of emphases, including expanding and improving the study of world geography, economics, politics and ecology	Shifting focus away from U.S. values, which will erode patriotism
SCHOOL-BASED DECISION MAKING	A way to get decisions that directly affect students made at the level closest to the students	A system which gives principals and teachers too much control, gives parents too little, and makes school boards irrelevant
OUTCOME-BASED EDUCATION	Identifying what graduates should know and be able to do in the 21st century and then redesigning instruction to help all students reach these goals	Potentially lowering standards for all to succeed
SCHOOL VOUCHERS	A school choice plan which would drain middle class and advantaged students away from public schools, leaving only disadvantaged students and children with special needs	The only way to break up the public schools' monopolistic stranglehold on education, and a way to inject competition into the system
SCHOOL CHOICE	A strategy that would result in a stark division between have and have-not schools and accelerate the exodus away from inner cities	A way to force schools to improve, where those that cannot improve would be forced to close their doors
CHARACTER EDUCATION	Teaching students universal values that are basic to school and social behavior	Government interloping in matters that belong in the family and church

With this kind of communication gap, it is hardly surprising that the two sides misunderstand each other and continue to move further apart. Yet policymakers and educators are often astonished by the violent opposition and attacks their reforms generate. And fundamentalist parents say they feel excluded from the educational decision-making process and patronized by educators who insist that they know better than parents what is best for their children. (chart adapted from a chart produced by the Education Commission of the States.)

THE POLITICS OF DISSENT

One thing on which school reformers and their opponents agree is that the religious right has become more sophisticated and effective in recent years. From reports of those who follow activities of the religious right, news accounts and interviews, it is clear that the movement's influence is rising and that its core messages on education are heard by millions of Americans who may or may not share its world view. Through the 1980s, the religious right was characterized by political activity on the national level, accompanied by isolated, local confrontations. In the 1990s, the focus has shifted to local political activity frequently directed by national organizations with well-orchestrated plans. According to Ralph Reed Jr., director of the Christian Coalition, "The real battles of concern to Christians are in neighborhoods, school boards, city councils and state legislatures."

LOCAL FOCUS

The religious right's new strategy has focused on electing candidates in local, low voter turnout elections, where conservative Christians turn out in record numbers and mainstream voters stay home. "The fundamentalists are a minority, but they are an active minority," notes Skipp Porteous, president of the liberal Institute for First Amendment Studies. "This is where their power is."

The new focus has given rise to the Christian Coalition's "15 Percent Solution" — since roughly 30 percent of eligible adults vote, a candidate needs only 15 percent of the vote plus one to win. In many low-turnout, local elections, candidates can be elected with only 5-7 percent of the vote. And it has spawned Citizens for Excellence in Education, a national organization devoted to getting "Godly Christians" elected to local school boards.

By mobilizing church congregations to vote, the religious right has been able to influence elections to a degree far greater than its numbers would suggest. Tracking is difficult, since the movement frequently supports so-called "stealth" candidates who avoid public affiliations, but recent surveys estimate that 30-40 percent of religious right candidates won local elections in the last two years.

It is a strategy that is working. Candidates supported by the religious right have succeeded in exploiting dissatisfaction with schools to find common ground with moderate and conventional conservative voters. With the help of national organizations, they have done a remarkable job of mobilizing support and getting out the vote. Once elected, they have gained substantial clout in molding personnel and budget decisions as well as framing the philosophy under which a school functions.

Working on the inside and the outside of the system, the religious right has continued to press its agenda at the local level. In the process, certain themes have appeared in struggles across the country.

ATTACK ON REFORM INITIATIVES

Outcome-based education (OBE) has become the rallying point for the religious right's opposition to school reform. (For a complete discussion of this aspect of the conflict, refer to the following section on "The Lightning Rod of Debate," beginning on page 14.) In addition, conservative forces oppose curricula and programs ranging from whole language learning to multicultural studies, values education to self-esteem building.

In North Carolina, Gaston County has received the brunt of the attention for its well-organized opposition to the proposed Odyssey project, but communities from Beaufort to Fuquay-Varina are also experiencing the effects of religious right objections to reform. Increasingly, school systems piloting the state-funded OBE product are seeing variations of

nationally-produced letters to editors appearing in local papers, or are being contacted by parents who have heard OBE denounced by religious right groups or supporters in their community.

FIGHT SEX EDUCATION

In many communities, sex education is the first step in the religious rights involvement in the public schools. Recently, the focus has shifted from eliminating sex education altogether to substituting "abstinence-only" programs for sex education curricula already in existence. In Wilmington, North Carolina, a well-regarded Family Life Education curriculum for grades K–12 ignited the religious right to action. Opponents to the program helped elect a more conservative school board, which negotiated a compromise: parents can now choose between an abstinence-only program, Sex Respect, and the Family Life Education curriculum.

CHALLENGE OF BOOKS & TEACHING MATERIALS

Religious right groups continue to push for the censorship of materials – including classic novels, plays, films and student newspapers – considered at odds with religion. The challengers were more active in 1992-93 than at any time in the previous 11 years studied by the People for the American Way. A total of 395 incidents were reported in 44 states. In 41 percent of the challenges, [illegible] materials were [illegible] in some way. North Carolina objectors were successful in removing or restricting materials from schools in Hillsborough, Elon, Durham, Charlotte, Mount Pleasant, Randleman, Cumberland, Randolph County and Transylvania County.

ATTEMPT TO REESTABLISH PRAYER IN THE SCHOOLS

A "loophole" raised by the 1992 ruling of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit in New Orleans – which made school prayer legal when it is spontaneous, initiated and led by students, and nonsectarian – has resulted in a renewed effort to bring prayer back to the schools. Georgia passed legislation in 1994 allowing a moment of quiet reflection by students; other states including Tennessee, Alabama and Virginia have already approved similar bills.

In Surry County, North Carolina, a school board recently approved a policy which allows teachers to lead student-initiated religious groups before or after school, group meetings of silence at the beginning of school day, and permits religious activities at school [illegible] as they do not interfere with other. Groups like the Christian Coalition have urged students to initiate prayer at graduation ceremonies, leading schools such as Raleigh's Broughton High School in Raleigh to have two separate baccalaureate services – one sponsored by the school and one privately sponsored.

NATIONAL INFLUENCE

Part of the success of these local efforts can be attributed to the [illegible] in developing and nurturing people and programs. Although these organizations [illegible] to deny local involvement, their stamp can be seen in the strategies, support and even wording of local campaigns. The principal organizations that make up the religious right generally speak out on the same issues, but there appears to be an unspoken division of labor or at least specialization among the key players, as outlined below.

CHRISTIAN COALITION

The Christian Coalition is a political lobbying group created by Pat Robertson after his unsuccessful run for the Republican presidential nomination in 1988. The fastest growing organization of its kind on the right, it has 800 chapters with more than 450,000 active paying members and an annual budget in the $10-15 million range. A membership of one

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million donors, activists and volunteers is projected for 1994. From its headquarters in Virginia Beach, Virginia, the organization runs candidates for low turnout local elections, promoting its "15 Percent Solution," offers materials including a publication, *How to Elect Christians to Public Office*, and training sessions on how to win elections; and contributes to legislative fights of particular interest to the religious right. For example, the group sent roughly $230,000 to support a school voucher referendum in California.

In recent years, the Christian Coalition has actively focused on the internal operation of Republican Party. It published a handbook outlining the state-by-state selection process for delegates to the 1992 Republican National Convention; succeeded in bringing a large number of delegates – by the organization's count, 42 percent of the delegates were Evangelicals; and influenced the Platform Committee of Republican National Committee, which adopted a platform calling for school prayer, a voucher system of education and a ban on abortion. On the state level, the organization received media attention in the spring of 1994 for its influence on the Virginia Republican Convention, which nominated conservative Oliver North for the U.S. Senate race, and control of state Party Conventions in Texas, Minnesota and Iowa.

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF CHRISTIAN EDUCATORS/CITIZENS FOR EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION (CEE)

Citizens for Excellence in Education, perhaps the most political of all the national groups, is leading the campaign to secure seats on school boards. Founded in 1983 by Dr. Robert Simonds and based in Costa Mesa, California, the group claims 1,600 chapters of 210,00 parents in 50 states, with a projected 1994 budget of $710,000. CEE not only encourages parents to challenge their local schools, but provides how-to manuals, training sessions and support. Between 1989 and 1993, it claims to have helped 6,000 members attain school board positions. It has been particularly active on curricula issues such as sexuality education and creationism, and in school voucher legislation.

"Only Godly Christians can truly qualify for this critically important position," founder Robert Simonds contends. "When we can get an active Christian Parents Committee in operation in all districts, we can take complete control of all local school boards. This would allow us to determine all local policy; select good textbooks, good curriculum programs, superintendents and principals."

FOCUS ON THE FAMILY

Focus on the Family – an evangelical ministry providing advice and information to families in hopes of bringing them to God – emphasizes family solidarity and child rearing. James Dobson, the popular psychologist, author and radio show host, founded the organization in 1977. It is headquartered in Colorado Springs, Colorado. One of the largest, most influential Christian right organizations in the nation, Focus on the Family reported a budget of $78 million in 1992. The organization offers videos and other "character-building" products, including a variety of books and publications on varied topics, that it says are being used by nearly 22,000 public schools. In addition, Focus on the Family has established policy institutes in 30 states, which lobby government at all levels and prod churches to get involved with the political process.

CONCERNED WOMEN FOR AMERICA

Concerned Women for America, a "pro-family" Christian group, promotes the traditional role of women. The founder and president is Beverly LaHaye, whose husband Tim LaHaye, was a leader of the now defunct Moral Majority. The Washington, DC-based organization boasts 800 chapters and 600,000 members with assets of over $1 million and income of over $8 million in fiscal year 1993. Its emphasis is on lobbying and organizing on behalf of conservative Christian women, which extends to issues including education, abortion and the maintenance of traditional values. The group sponsors a weekly radio show and teaches members how to lobby local legislators and contact representatives in Washington; it has supported school voucher legislation in a number of states and launched a campaign to help Crisis Pregnancy Centers.

EAGLE FORUM

The Eagle Forum, which primarily fights sex education, was founded by anti-ERA activist Phyllis Schlafley in 1975 to advocate conservative views on family, education, and national defense through local state and federal government. The organization, based in Alton, Illinois, claims 80,000 members.

In recent years, Schlafley has also taken on outcome-based education, which she says "has parents even more agitated than they are about explicit sex education." The Eagle Forum has conducted seminars in Georgia to challenge the state's new outcome-based education programs, and is supporting an alternative to Alabama's educational reform proposal.

CONTROVERSIAL TACTICS

While no one disputes the right of fundamentalists to support candidates, there is controversy about their intents and tactics. Liberal constitutional rights groups and many mainstream voters fear the religious right ultimately wants to impose conservative religious beliefs on school programs. "The religious right wants to transform public education into sectarian academies where only one point of view – theirs – is presented," claims David Cranc, vice president of People for the American Way, one of the liberal groups that have sprung up in opposition to the religious right.

Increasing activity by the religious right tends to create increasing opposition. In San Diego County, where a so-called "stealth" campaign in 1990 resulted in two-thirds of the religious right's candidates being elected to local office, residents have formed voter education groups to scrutinize candidates' political agendas and identify candidates who hide their political affiliations. In Xenia, Ohio, where two CEE-backed school board members were elected, voters became concerned in the campaign of a third CEE candidate and voted him down.

Critics claim that religious right candidates mislead voters by failing to disclose their political agenda or conservative religious views, campaigning on a moderate platform stressing a return to traditional family values. They are particularly concerned about "stealth" candidates who run for office without disclosing an allegiance to ultraconservative agendas or beliefs, and only after election begin to espouse and act on religious and philosophical mandates. Such candidates tend to reveal their positions and political affiliations only to like-minded Christians, and often refuse to answer questions from the press, engage in public debates or answer questionnaires put out by bipartisan groups like the League of Women Voters. Religious right groups do not deny the strategy. "We do our best to fly under the radar of the media and professionals so they don't know what hit them until it's too late," says Ralph Reed, executive director of the Christian Coalition. In New York City's 1992 elections, for example, the group denied campaigning for local candidates, but claimed victory when 66 won. Other strategies that have proven effective for opponents of school reform also create controversy.

OVERLOADING THE SYSTEM

The religious right can tie up school systems' resources – and erode patience – by exploiting loopholes and gray areas in school board policies, submitting recommendations after the board has analyzed and chosen a curriculum, or making frequent requests for children to be excused from certain assignments.

MOUNTING OR THREATENING LAWSUITS

Legal costs can mount quickly, and many districts don't have the contingency funds to cover the expenses involved in a lengthy battle. The religious right has found that even the threat of a lawsuit can have a profound impact. Sometimes the plaintiffs receive pro bono legal advice from national groups such as the Rutherford Institute.

DISTRIBUTING THE "STRETCH LETTER"

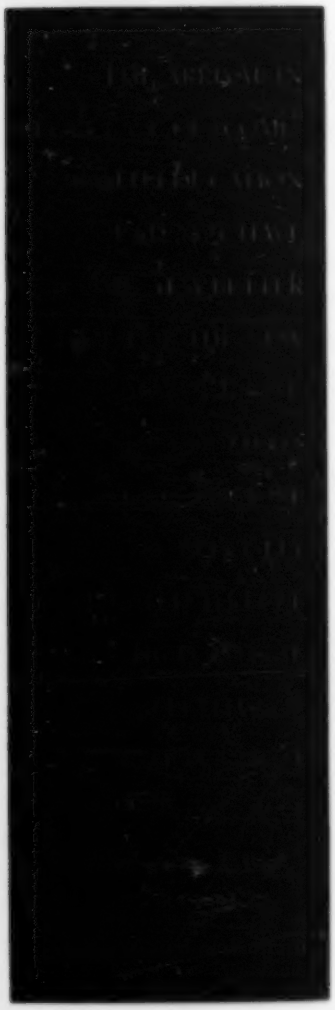
The stretch letter, which has been distributed by the thousands, especially in the 1980s, suggests that parents request that their children be involved in no programs involving psychological tests, values clarification or sex education. It invokes the Hatch Amendment to threaten lawsuits and loss of federal revenues to school systems, and mentions that regulations provide a procedure for filing complaints at the local and federal levels.

SPONSORING LEGISLATION

Larger strategies center around legislation that will have a long-term effect on education. These include choice bills and voucher plans stipulating that state funding will follow the student whether the student attends a public school, private school, sectarian or home-based school; pupil-protection acts that mandate parental approval of all textbooks, supplemental materials, programs and teaching methodologies; and home schooling bills that direct public school systems to provide ancillary services and materials to children educated at home.

One of the major charges of educational reformers, however, is that the religious right deliberately misrepresents their programs and positions, using inflammatory rhetoric to stir up parents and communities for their own ends. Nowhere is this conflict more apparent than in the debate around outcome-based education.

OBE: THE LIGHTNING ROD OF DEBATE



One widespread reform – outcome-based education (OBE) – has become the rallying point for the religious rights crusade against the schools. Why? In attempting to fundamentally change the process and purpose of public education without expanding the lines of communication to local stakeholders, some reformers have unintentionally provided a clear target for the main charges of the religious right.

Outcome-based education is a strategy for identifying what graduates should know and be able to do to succeed in the 21st century – and redesigning teaching, instruction and assessment to help all students reach those goals. A logical outgrowth of the reformers educational view, it is the fastest-growing educational reform of the 1990s. At least 24 states have developed some form of educational outcomes, and 12 other states have made outcomes part of the accreditation or assessment process. While OBE got its start in the 1970s, this approach has taken off in recent years as a result of three major factors:

- International comparisons that showed U.S. students lagging
- The establishment of national educational goals by the nations governors
- An increasing push from the private sector for a better-trained workforce

In theory, OBE defines desired outcomes – what children are to learn and be able to do – and measures their progress based on actual achievement, rather than time spent in a classroom. It is designed to meet students' individual needs through various teaching strategies and give them enough time and help to reach their potential.

In practice, OBE represents a major shift in focus. Attention and incentives are centered around outcomes – that is, student achievement – instead of inputs, such as class hours and strict curricula regulations. Schools then graduate students based on the specific skills and knowledge they can demonstrate, rather than the number of hours they spend in class. This means moving away from traditional Carnegie units of instruction, which measure classes taken, to learning outcomes defined by the state and by local schools. OBE is based on the belief that traditional instructional methods are not working, that setting academic standards and challenging students to master them will produce better educated children, and that more students will succeed because they are encouraged to reach their potential. It revolves around a few basic principles:

- Determine what students need to know to become successful adults, then design lessons and tests accordingly.
- Recognize differences in learning styles and abilities and allow children to repeat a lesson until they understand it.
- Eliminate traditional grading systems, such as the bell curve, which assume that some students will fail.

Supporters also believe that some simple values – such as treating others with respect or avoiding conflicts – cannot be separated from the education process, and should be incorporated into the outcomes. As a result, OBE programs tend to focus on mastering skills – such as negotiations and cooperation – as well as achievements, such as reading fluency and mathematics knowledge.

While educators say the concept is too new to produce many measurable results, reformers cite early evidence that the philosophy can work.

- In Connecticut, a heightened emphasis on Mastery Tests is credited with an increase in the graduation rate and the rate of students going on to college, as well as improvements in average reading and math scores.
- Since Johnson City School District in New York adopted the new approach 20 years ago, there has been a sharp drop in the dropout rate and a corresponding improvement in student performance.
- Test scores have jumped substantially at individual schools, such as Thorpe Elementary School in Jefferson City, Missouri, which has used outcome-based instruction for several years.

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Opponents view OBE in an entirely different light. To the religious right it is an experimental, untested program that hampers bright students by "dumbing down" school curricula, substitutes psychotherapy for the three Rs, and usurps parental authority by including values among the goals. Some see it as government's attempt to control children. In the words of Robert Simonds, it is "an insidious development to lock all children into mind control – creating a robot citizenry."

Based on these concerns, the religious right has mounted an offensive against outcome-based education reforms in states and school districts throughout the nation. The challenge has spread from Pennsylvania, where crusader Peg Luksik was successful in legislative modifications of the plan, to Alabama, Virginia, Kentucky, Florida, New Mexico, Colorado, Iowa, Ohio, New York, Kansas, Minnesota, Washington, Oregon and North Carolina. In the literature of religious right groups, objections to OBE reforms fall into six broad categories.

OBE OBJECTION 1: The outcomes identified by states are ambiguous and hard to measure.

Opponents say they do not object to goals that are clearly academic, such as saying a child needs to be able to count to 100 by the end of kindergarten. What they are troubled by is outcomes such as "communicate effectively and responsibly in a variety of ways and settings" or "think critically and creatively and integrate experiences and knowledge to form reasoned judgments and solve problems," which leave room for interpretation and are more difficult to measure. This is one area where the communication gap between different world views is played out. "OBE is packaged in deceptive language that appears to mislead parents," says Patti B. Deaton of Cabarrus. Rod Riffel, senior program associate for the National Education Association agrees. "The program is not being defined clearly. That's where the confusion stems from."

OBE OBJECTION 2: Some of the outcomes involve values better taught by parents.

Conservative Christians object to goals that could impart values – such as "All students develop interpersonal communication, decision making, coping and evaluation skills and apply them to personal, family and community living," or "All students understand and appreciate their worth as unique and capable individuals, and exhibit self-esteem." These outcomes approaches are seen as anti-Christian in that they may teach values in conflict with the moral fiber of many who attend church regularly.

Such programs are seen by the religious right as intruding upon parents' rightful role, promoting values established by the government, rather than the family. "Many people have complained about the state not adequately teaching academics. Let's see them do that part right before they expand their role," quips Peg Luksik, chairman of the Pennsylvania Parents Commission and probably the best-known critic of OBE.

OBE OBJECTION 3: Outcomes approaches will teach children to be "robots."

OBE is viewed as a method of manipulating students through behavior modification, based on B.F. Skinner's methods of training animals through repetitive reinforcement. "Such psychological manipulation of children opens the door to destroying their traditional and religious values," says Robert Simonds. In fact, objectors see "politically correct indoctrination" as the hidden purpose of OBE programs. According to Phyllis Schlafley of the Eagle Forum, OBE is a "process for government telling our children how to live, what to say, what to think, what to know and what not to know," as is evident in outcomes that are "heavily layered with such 'politically correct' notions as training for world citizenship and government (instead of patriotism), population control, radical environmentalism and government 'solutions' for every problem."

OBE OBJECTION 4: Outcomes approaches hold back the brightest students.

Opponents argue that the mastery approach will require less of the most advanced students, stifling individual potential for excellence by holding the entire class to the level of learning achievable by every student. The end result is teaching to the lowest common denominator or "dumbing down" the entire class. In Phyllis Schlafly's words, "If OBE were applied to basketball, the basket would have to be lowered so all could score equally."

Changes in assessment are also seen as a problem. While traditional Carnegie units are widely accepted standards of achievement which college admissions tests can measure, goals and learning outcomes are sometimes vague and subjective, making it impossible to conduct tests that allow comparisons with other schools or states. "If OBE is allowed to be implemented in Johnston County, I fear that when Little Johnny graduates in 2004, he may not be able to read, but he will certainly be politically correct concerning his views on environmentalism and global citizenship. He may not be able to write, but he will understand and appreciate his worth as a unique and capable individual who exhibits self-esteem," says Rev. Danny R. Stephenson of Smithfield.

OBE OBJECTION 5: OBE reforms will divert scarce resources away from academics.

There will be huge additional costs to implement OBE reforms, the opposition claims since the educational system is not set up for individual education; the costs would be astronomical for retraining teachers in an entirely new system; new assessment systems including portfolios of students' work; additional computers; even at inappropriately early ages; curricula changes; and the shift to performance-based tests.

Ted A. Mueller, a school board member in Greenfield, Wisconsin, sees other potential costs hidden in a scan of the literature of educational reform, including opportunities for teachers, expanded professional growth, expanded preparation time requiring a lower student-to-teacher ratio, a longer school year, a longer school day, and an expanded focus on early childhood education. The implication is that these costs will result in higher school taxes.

OBE OBJECTION 6: There is no evidence that it works.

Finally, objectors consider OBE as a vast social experiment in which children are the "guinea pigs." They argue that these reforms are being forced on entire state school systems without evidence that they have been found effective elsewhere.

Opponents say that the supporters of OBE cannot produce "replicable research" or pilot studies to show that it works. Instead, they cite the failure of early Mastery Learning programs in Chicago and Arkansas.

THE BATTLEGROUND OF REFORM

In early skirmishes, the critics are frequently winning the battle over OBE. They have effectively blocked, stalled or thwarted the movement in some states.

- In Virginia the state's entire OBE planned was scrapped as a result of vocal objections to goals that included values. Then Governor L. Douglas Wilder called a halt to the much-criticized OBE plan in September 1993 because, "I do not now, nor have I ever, endorsed changing Virginia's educational standards to encompass values-based education." He instructed the State Department of Education to withdraw the Common Core of Learning initiative, citing the lack of public input into the proposals and lack of grassroots consensus for reform.
- In Kentucky, the Kentucky Educational Reform Act of 1990, hailed as a model for the nation and a leader in school restructuring, has become a recent target of criticism. Opponents want major revisions in controversial elements of the plan – such as its OBE focus and ungraded elementary schools – or outright repeal. The majority of Kentuckians responding to a Louisville Courier-Journal poll said school reform is experimenting with too many untested educational practices.

- **Pennsylvania** was the first state to mandate an OBE framework as state policy, and was also the first to become embroiled in the controversy. The 15 goals and 51 learning outcomes identified by the state produced negative and diverse reactions, expressed in a well-organized effort including videos, newsletters and a 900 telephone number. The controversy moved to the legislature which made changes – including eliminating the goal of "appreciating and understanding others," which was translated by opponents to mean the promotion of a value system different from the students' own – and passed a modified plan.
- **Alabama** started the process later, and is now facing similar challenges. Comprehensive reform similar to the Kentucky model is being pushed by A-Plus, a citizen's coalition; another organization, SCORE 100, is leading the fight for back-to-basics school legislation. While the Governor and many educators support the A-Plus legislation, SCORE 100's plan – which features required phonics instruction and open enrollment between school districts – has won an endorsement from the Alabama Education Association and the Eagle Forum.

In other communities, the political heat generated by the attack has become so intense, many advocates fear the reforms will be watered down, making them too tame to produce results. Why has opposition to OBE been so successful? Among the reasons suggested by observers:

- Citizens' dissatisfaction with the public schools and the effects of previous reforms
- Educators' inclination to underestimate ultraconservatives' ability to appeal to mainstream thinking
- Opponents' perception that officials asked for public input only as window dressing
- National organizations' effectiveness in shaping local efforts
- Educators' tendency to allow the religious right to frame the discussion, making it look as though they favor New Age practices, homosexuality and other targets
- Reformers' failure to avoid responding to "the semantics of division," thus becoming vulnerable to attack
- Opponents' success in misinterpreting the outcomes, aims and potential effects of OBE

THE NORTH CAROLINA EXPERIENCE

North Carolina's Gaston County won national attention in 1992 when it was awarded a $20 million grant to fund the Odyssey Project, an ambitious program bringing broad educational reforms to three district schools. A year later, opposition to the program sent shock waves through the local educational establishment, divided the community, and contributed to – if not caused – the New American Schools Development Corporation's withdrawal of funding.

The new program, based on the principles of OBE, was designed to create "world-class schools" and make Gaston County students better communicators, collaborators, creative producers, critical thinkers and citizens. It proposed significant changes, including the grouping of students by age and ability, rather than traditional K-12 levels; a different grading system, requiring demonstrations of mastery for graduation; a 200-day school year in four 10-week sessions; and a heavy emphasis on computers and other technology. Administrators and teachers, expecting the community to celebrate the district's success in landing this prestigious grant, were caught by surprise when a group of conservative parents and citizens objected. Led by a fundamentalist Christian minister, the Concerned Citizens for Public Education organized a vocal and public attack on the Odyssey Project, which they asserted was an educational experiment that would manipulate students through behavior modification, promote secular humanism and New Age practices, and "teach children to move away from their moral underpinnings, like the church." From the vantage point of hindsight, it is clear that the proposal contained some sure-fire red flags to the religious right, both in terms of content and semantics. For example:

- The program stressed outcome-based education, which was under fire nationally from CEE as a plot to use public schools for social engineering.

- A teaching plan known as "paideia," a Greek word pertaining to education based in a study of the humanities, raised the alarm of secular humanistic learning.
- Greek letters used to designate levels, such as "Alpha" for pre-natal through age three, were interpreted as condoning homosexuality.
- An early childhood education program for "at-risk" children included in the program was seen as government's attempt to interfere with families.
- The move to a new system of grading, based on demonstrated mastery of material rather than traditional Carnegie units, was attacked for making it more difficult for students to be evaluated for college admissions.

As one fellow superintendent commented, "the program could not have been better designed to create controversy if they had tried." In addition, some actions by the administration fueled the flames of opposition. The fact that educators were unprepared to articulate a defense of the program enabled the opposition to frame the debate, putting the schools in a defensive posture from the start. Then, when the district administration retreated for several days to consider a communication strategy, opponents had the media to themselves.

On the other hand, the divisive politics of the small group of opponents ripped the community apart. In fact, as author Rob Weston argued in a 1993 Church and State article, "The events unfolding in Gaston County offer a textbook case of how bitterness and acrimony can divide peaceful communities when the religious right comes to town. It also offers a clear example of how these groups use distortion of facts and fear-mongering to attack public education."

While the leaders of Gaston's Concerned Citizens for Public Education denied any formal ties with Citizens for Excellence in Education, the national connection was evident. As the controversy escalated, literature from CEE began circulating in conservative churches, the charges that CEE leveled against Pennsylvania's OBE plan were recycled, and videos and other materials used in Pennsylvania surfaced. Despite the aggressive campaign of opponents, however, the school board voted to continue implementation of the Odyssey Project. Opponents vowed to continue the fight, to organize for school board elections and to create an anti-Odyssey majority. They also threatened to sue over the program, and retained an attorney formerly associated with the Rutherford Institute, a religious right legal aid group. Meanwhile, the New American Schools Development Corporation made the question moot, withdrawing its funding allegedly because the project didn't meet certain standards.

Some other counties had different experiences with outcome-based education programs, however. In Johnston County, North Carolina, for instance, a new plan was approved despite opposition from the religious right. Superintendent Tom Houlihan assured the community that "in no way will this superintendent or school board push for a system of grading and reporting that does not enjoy widespread community support." The administration changed the name of the program to Student Learning Outcomes, stressed that it was a unique program tailored to the county's needs and took steps to guarantee community involvement. A system was established to allow teachers and administrators to vote each year on whether to continue with the process, and a citizens advisory group was created to review the process along the way.

What makes the difference between success and failure? In the case of two North Carolina counties, the key seems to have been the level of communication that went on before the project was proposed and the commitment to building support. These and other factors can set the tone of the debate – and determine whether schools go back to the basics or reform for the future.

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THE SEARCH FOR COMMON GROUND

Writing about the opposition to school reform is a difficult task. On the one hand, for a supporter of school reform, the tactics being employed by organized opposition groups are reminiscent of McCarthyism. On the other hand, even the most ardent supporters are forced to concede that the newness of these reforms makes them difficult to quantify – and many find themselves "stepping off the bandwagon" when it comes to one reform issue or another.

Language itself is central to the debate. The semantics used by the religious right to describe school reform could not be more likely to evoke passions: social engineering, gay rights, satanism, brain washing, mass experimentation on children. Those words, referred to in this discussion as the "semantics of division," evoke uncommon passion among reasonable people who simply want what is best for the children. However, the tactics and language of those who support school reform merit equal criticism. Opponents frequently charge reformers with being "arrogant" and "blind to the concerns of those who pay for the schools," and if one judges the approaches some reformers use to advance their initiatives, it is hard to disagree.

- Too many school reformers fail to take the time to communicate with parents, educators and taxpayers before change begins.
- Too many policymakers are equally guilty of mandating massive reform efforts without giving local schools and communities the time needed to understand and embrace change.
- Too many times, the large and compelling body of knowledge on the difficulty of instituting change is ignored in the zeal of policymakers and reformers to find quick answers to complicated educational issues.
- Too many supporters frame the debate in jargon, educational buzzwords and ambiguous phrases that have long been "red flags" to the religious right.

The semantics and behavior of both sides obscures the one belief that unites the religious right and school reformers: a profound dissatisfaction with public education as it is today. While that common belief should provide a basis for finding common ground, the chasm between the paradigms of the two sides makes such a search elusive. One group is striving to radically change the way schools have been and are operating today; the other group is just as desperately seeking a return to schools as they were in a fondly remembered yesterday. One group wants to structure schools in a far more complex way than they are today; the other wants a return to a less complicated past. One group believes that the only certainty is change; the other believes that needless change has contributed to the decline of the schools and society. The gap is so profound it is difficult to imagine a day when school reformers and the religious right can comfortably co-exist, much less find common ground.

The search for common ground is ultimately the task of the millions of people in the middle: people who want to see schools become much better than they are today; people who want to see responsible educational change. It is up to those people – elected officials, educators, taxpayers, parents, business executives, community leaders and concerned citizens – to be informed consumers of school reform and of opposition to school reform.

Separating the false claims, unfair charges, semantics of division and semantics of reform from the central issue – how to make schools better – is a daunting task. Yet responsible people everywhere must shoulder it if schools in North Carolina and the nation are to become second to none.

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IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS AND STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION OFFICIALS

- **Keep eyes open when advancing major reforms.** The catalysts for division in Pennsylvania, Alabama and Kentucky were educational initiatives proposed or enacted by legislative bodies. In a state like North Carolina, which is advancing OBE experimentation, it is important that legislators and department officials understand the Pandora's box of issues that reform can open.
- **Demand responsible reforms.** In their eagerness to bring about change, reformers can oversell the value of some experiments and underestimate potential new costs. While early experiments with many reforms, including OBE, have shown promising results, it is virtually impossible to make an ironclad case that these are the educational answers so many have been searching for. Don't pretend that an experiment with a promising idea is a sure-fire panacea.
- **Demand that reform be accompanied with community education.** In communities that have been able to find common ground when reforms are proposed, there is generally one common denominator: educators took great pains to communicate to the community and there was a solid base of local support.
- **Be attuned to the semantics of division.** Policymakers should expect reformers to be sensitive to "red flag" words and phrases that are almost certain to ignite controversy. Are new reform initiatives framed in language that the average voter can understand and accept?
- **Ensure that reform debates are bipartisan.** Too frequently, commentators tend to generalize the religious right versus school reformers conflict as a conservative Republican versus liberal Democrat struggle. It is not. Many of the goals of school reformers have been heavily influenced by the thinking of moderate conservatives in the business community. The philosophies undergirding school reform and the religious right cut across party lines, and no debate around reform should be allowed to deteriorate into party name calling.
- **Recognize the political agenda of some participants in the debate.** Opposition to reform is not a partisan issue, but to some it is a political issue. While many well-intentioned people have legitimate reservations about some reform initiatives, others see reform opposition as a political organizing tool. Organizations promoting strategies like the "15% Solution" are looking for emotional issues which will motivate like-minded people to get to the polls in low turnout elections. For office holders, it is critical to distinguish between those who are seeking compromise and those who are seeking political power.
- **Respond to legitimate criticism.** Working together, state department officials and legislators recently crafted some changes in Kentucky's sweeping school reform law. The changes responded to critics of the law who felt the state was attempting to teach character-related values which could not be evaluated, even if they could be taught. Policymakers responded by dropping some of the original goals of their reform bill, providing a good example of an attempt to find common ground where compromise is reasonable.
- **Don't throw the reform "baby" out with the bath water.** The compromise course taken by policymakers in Kentucky is in sharp contrast to the action of Virginia's governor, who simply called for an abrupt end to OBE experimentation when opposition mounted. If opposition to reform is met with this kind of unilateral action, it is almost certain that there will be a chilling effect on future efforts to improve the schools.
- **Recognize when compromise is impossible.** The primary dilemma facing policymakers is that it is frequently difficult to satisfy opponents of reform with anything less than a complete abandonment of reform initiatives. Leadership requires the discernment between those times when going forward is irresponsible and those times when going backwards is even more so.

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IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS & SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS

- **Remember: it could happen here.** Many local communities which have been divided by battles around school reform had never experienced deep community polarization before. While most people view their own communities as unique, it could happen in your town.
- **Build support before you begin reforming.** As noted earlier, the typical difference between communities which are successfully experimenting with reform and those which encounter disabling opposition is the time spent educating the community about the changes that are coming.
- **Education begins with your faculty.** Nothing can erode confidence in a reform initiative faster than parents hearing teachers express doubts and reservations about change. It is impossible to spend too much time preparing your faculty for a major reform initiative. Ideally, teams of faculty members should visit communities experimenting with similar reforms; outside presenters should speak to all faculty members. Better yet, faculties should be part of the decision to go forward.
- **Don't forget that "honesty is the best policy."** Opponents of reform are quick to point out that many reforms are "untested" and "unproven." If there is not a sufficient body of evidence proving beyond a shadow of a doubt that new programs will be better than the old, admit it. If a new approach ultimately will require additional funding, admit it.
- **Your unanimous support could be vital.** Much has been said about the need to educate the community and the faculty. Don't forget that support for the program begins and ends with a unanimous school board and a team of central office administrators and building-level educators committed to making reforms work. Parents begin doubting reforms if teachers are criticizing them; taxpayers begin to raise questions when the school board is divided.
- **Be proactive and respond to criticism.** It is easy to dismiss an angry letter to an editor or a critical sermon delivered in a small church as a fluke initiated by a crank. As you have read, the reform opposition movement is well organized and not to be taken lightly. Meet with critics. Invite dialogue. Seek common ground. Don't wait until an isolated letter has become a groundswell.

IMPLICATIONS FOR BUSINESS LEADERS & CHAMBER OF COMMERCE OFFICIALS

- **This is not someone else's fight.** When controversy arises, it is easy to say "I don't have a dog in that fight" and stay out of it – particularly for business leaders who rely on community goodwill. In the case of school reform, it is anything but someone else's fight: education is an economic, as well as social, issue.
- **Community polarization is an economic development issue.** Every year, when real estate dealers are polled on the most important factors which motivate people to buy a new home, the quality of local schools ranks near the top of the list. For a new home buyer with children, nothing is more likely to cause them to reject a community than controversy surrounding the schools. Further, businesses looking to establish or relocate a facility are quick to reject communities which are not united and working together.
- **School reform is an economic development issue.** The typical business leader is much farther ahead in understanding the new realities of global competition than the average person. It is important to note that the school reform agenda has largely been framed around the themes of the new global economy and competitiveness. Leading national business people have been heavily involved as reform agendas were developed.

- **Act before it is too late**. In communities like Gaston County, business and elected leaders privately admit that they felt the opposition to reform would not attract support and chose to stay out of it in the initial stages. While they were on the sidelines, the situation quickly grew to the point that hundreds of angry parents were attending school board meetings. At that point, many community leaders were afraid to become involved. The time for respected, rational voices to be heard is early.
- **Finally, demand responsible reform**. The business community shouldn't be asked to unequivocally support every reform which is proposed. Just as policymakers should demand responsible reform initiatives from the educational community, so too should business leaders. Is there common ground? Has the community been involved in planning? Local and state business leaders are in a unique position to broker agreement and lessen polarization.

This report was researched and written by Debbie Lee Averitt, communications specialist, in collaboration with the Public School Forum staff.

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